

General Accounting Office (GAO) Report to Congressional Requesters: NSLP Efforts Needed to Improve Nutrition and Encourage Healthy Eating

Why GAO Did This Study

GAO was asked to report on the extent to which school lunches, nationwide, were meeting nutrition standards, and schools were encouraging healthy eating, what barriers selected schools faced in accomplishing this, and what innovative steps they had taken to overcome barriers.

What GAO Found

- ⌘ Lunches meet requirements for nutrients such as protein, vitamins, calcium, and iron, but not the fat requirements even though there is improvement for calories from fat (38 to 34%). More than ¾ of Elem. Schools had not met the 30% goal for calories from fat. There was improvement in Na content of meals but still considerably higher than 800 mg standard. (significant progress since the mid 1990s) The % of Elem. schools that provided low fat options increased from 34% to 82%, and for secondary schools 71% to 91%.
- ⌘ ***Barriers to providing nutritious meals:*** budget pressures, competing time demands, when offering healthy foods, they take the risk that students will buy fewer lunches, limited time to teach nutrition, and profits from vending machines and snack bar sales.
- ⌘ ***Steps taken to overcome barriers:*** Modified recipes, teach nutrition by integrating nutrition lessons into reading and math classes, school food policies, enlisted help from parents community organizations and businesses, and packaging healthy food in a manner similar to what students would find in a fast-food restaurant. Noted that overcoming barriers required strong and persevering leadership.
- ⌘ ***Nutrition Education:*** Programs with longer duration, more contact hours, and more components result in positive outcomes. Importance on focusing on student behavior instead of general nutrition education programs. Three states visited required nutrition education as part of health class at the secondary level, however only one state included it when preparing for a statewide health test.
- ⌘ According to the study, a relatively small % of districts have policies in place that require the sale of healthy choices or restrict the sale of FMNV.
- ⌘ According to state and federal officials, when schools serve meals that do not comply with federal nutrition requirements, enforcement options are limited.
- ⌘ Researchers reported that when the number of healthy entrees was increased the % of students purchasing them increased.

What GAO Recommends

That the Secretaries of Agriculture, Health and Human Services, and Education work together to identify specific strategies to help school promote nutrition education while meeting the demands of state academic standards and to encourage each state to identify a focal point to promote collaborative efforts that would further develop nutrition education activities for schools.

How This Pertains to Our Policy

Our policy is a collaborative effort to improve the health of school children statewide. This study identified the lack of nutrition policies districts have, indicating a need for a statewide nutrition policy, and our policy includes all areas of schools, not just food service. It would also help eliminate the barriers districts identified in the report. Also, because we are the “state” districts look to us for setting the standards, which is what a statewide nutrition policy would do.

